Determinism in *The Glass Menagerie*

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Literary criticism in the West has a long tradition of analyzing dramatic works with regard to their convergence or divergence from the classical models. In particular, plays are examined to determine how well they can be categorized as tragedies or comedies, naturalistic or romantic, deterministic or humanistic. When a play is successful in creating a significant dramatic effect and yet diverges at least overtly from the classical norms of Aristotle, it is assured of intensive scrutiny to determine just how it succeeds in spite of these apparent violations. Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* is a case in point.

The Glass Menagerie is a work of unquestionable dramatic power. It appeals to popular audiences of many different cultures and simultaneously is credited by literary specialists as a genuine work of art. Yet, the play varies overtly and at more sublime levels from many classical, neo-classical, romantic and realistic tenets.(1) In the case of the first three theories, *The Glass Menagerie's* most blatant divergence is in the traditional concept of unity of action and time. In the case of realism, the work's adoption of the convention of a narrator and its dream imagery, not to mention its use of projections, are clear violation of accepted form. The play comes

closest perhaps to being romantic in form, yet, psychologically, it is quite realistic. The play achieves a degree of unity from its focus on the fate of Laura and the concurrent disintegration of the Wingfield family.

Analysis of the ways in which *The Glass Menagerie* diverges in form from traditional dramatic styles has been dealt with at length in several works.(2) In this paper I shall focus on the question of whether or not the work is deterministic in the philosophical sense.

It is interesting that the great tragedies of Western drama derive from basically deterministic views of the universe. The Greeks believed in a universe where everything was completely ordered, and not even the gods could circumvent the fates. Shakespeare's too was a deterministic universe, but one in which the Judeo-Christian God had predetermined the destiny of all its aspects from the time of creation, and then had bound himself to his own rules. Tragedy in these divine universes occurs when puny man repenting of his foolish errors finds that he must still pay the penalties for his mistakes.

The modern tragedies of Ibsen, Strindberg, O'neil and Miller differ from the classic forms in that their deterministic universes are naturalistic ones. That is the gods play no roles. There are no gods. The universe is blind and uncaring of man, but just as remorseless in demanding that all its parts follow their predetermined paths without divergence and that balance be restored by extracting penalties for transgressions. These three periods of great tragedy differ in their concepts of how the universe is structured in detail, but all agree that it is structured, that it is more or less mindless of man, that events set in motion in the past will grind their way to their inevitable conclusion in the future and that transgressions must be balanced by penalties. Free will in tragedy is an illusion which some men hold only because of their ignorance of the greater scheme of things.

It is the fact that there seems to be a similar lack of free will in *The Glass Menagerie* which gives it a deterministic flavor. Determinism in *The Glass Menagerie*, however, varies from philosophical determinism in a way similar to that in which its characters differ from tragic protagonists.

Oedipus and Lear, Nora Helmer and Willy Loman are all doomed by powerful forces beyond their ken or control. For Oedipus and Lear the force is divine in origin. For Nora and Willy it is natural and inanimate. For all four their destiny is compounded by traps of their own individual, human fashioning, for each has his/her tragic flaw. Each gains tragic stature in our eyes because of the intensity with which they resist their fate, and because in the denouement they expurgate their flaws, though an unheeding universe still extracts its pound of flesh.

Amanda, Tom, Laura and Jim can hardly aspire to similar status. They have character flaws, but their flaws stem not from themselves but from their immediate environment. Their traps are not of their own making, but created by the society which shapes their values and creates them incomplete. Theirs are sins of omission rather than commission. *The Glass Menagerie* is not a tragedy in the heroic sense because Williams' characters are battling only with a society of small minded people rather than with some all powerful fate or natural, social force.

Tom, for example, never conceives of trying to reconcile his talent and ambitions with his obligations to his family. This is due neither to an inherent personality flaw nor to the intervention of a divine or inanimate fate. Tom's options are limited because his society teaches him to value his dreams and then limits the opportunity to fulfill those dreams to a chosen few who are usually required to forego familial obligations.

Amanda desperately tries to help Laura find a place in the world and

to understand Tom. She is forced to rely on outmoded (in Laura's case) techniques such as church socials and business school or marriage to help Laura because they are the only recourses sociecty has taught and allowed to her. In Tom's case Amanda knows only too well that society will not tolerate artists who support their families or druges who are artists. It is not Amanda who lives in a world of dreams of past glory and a simpler life, it is society itself which lives in such a world.

Laura is the most pathetic of the prisoners in in the play because she too has been taught only too well the values of her society. She has aspired as any normal teen-age girl in that society to friendships and to the attentions of the members of the opposite sex. Physically and emotionally however, Laura is not fully normal. She has learned that her society only pities and ostracizes the crippled, the weak and the different. She knows that trying to keep the values she has learned while pretending to ignore her own difference can only result in greater ostracism. Society has taught Laura to pity and ostracize herself, and so she retreats to the fragile security of her glass menagerie.

Jim, too, has learned too well the values of his age. Though he has the sense to be more, he has learned that the high school hero must always be the hero. He can never be other than on stage. He has the ability and opportunity to help Laura, and, for a moment, is genuinely attracted to her. However, society says heroes are supposed to marry all-American girls. If the hero is Catholic (in both senses of the word), the girl must be too. Society will not condone marriage of its heroes to the weak in body and strange in spirit.

None of these four can really be criticized for anything more than conformity. They can hardly be condemned for holding "normal" values. Amanda wants security for her daughter and a chance to live vicariously

through her. Tom wants to have adventure and be a poet. Laura wants love and a husband. Jim wants success and material welfare. Conflict arises because Tom to a certain extent and Laura even more so are not fully normal. They are forbidden, therefore, by society from participating in that society whose values they hold. These four people are will-less because they belong to and have learned too well the teachings of a society which gives lip service to freedom of expression and concern for the individual, but which, in reality, demands conformity and condemns the weak and incomplete.

The lack of free will in *The Glass Menagerie* then is not a condition of nature, but rather a failure, because of the teachings of a particular society, to learn to express that freedom. Williams' concept of determinism is likewise a construct of man rather than a state of the universe. Man has formed society, and man can therefore change it. The works of Williams deal with the weak, but he does not say that all men are weak. *Night of the Iguana* may be a case in point. Elsewhere Williams says clearly:

"... the sins of the world are really only its partialities, and these are what sufferings must atone for..."[3]

The determinism of *The Glass Menagerie* is limited to this single society; a society limited in time and place. It hardly classifies as determinism in the philosophic sense. Williams needs a flavor of determinism so that his audience will blame the society rather than his characters for the disintegration of the Wingfield family. To this end it is required that the audience be sympathetic toward all the characters and feel that they are helpless to avert their fates. Determinism used in this manner differs radically from philosophic determinism because of its implicit appeal to the audience to change and amend the society which destroys the Wingfields.

The concept of men changing their society voluntarily is antithetical to the very concept of determinism. In this sense determinism in *The Glass Menagerie* is not true determinism but a facade which the author utilizes to advance his appeal for a condemnation of a society which has no place for the small, the weak, the crippled and the rejected.

Notes

(1) An extensive analysis of the works of Tennessee Williams and their relationship to the four traditional forms of drama can be found in Esther Merle Jackson, *The Broken World of Tennessee Williams* (Madison and Milwaukee, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1965)

(2) In preparing this paper reference was made the following works:

The Glass Menagerie, Tennessee Williams, Dramatist Play Service, New York, 1945.

"Desire and the Black Massure" *One Arm and Other Stories*, Tennessee Williams, New Directions, 1948.

"Portrait of a Girl in Glass," *Ibid.*

The Broken World of Tennessee Williams, Op Cit.

Tennessee Williams His Life and Work, Benjamin Nelson, Peter Owen Ltd., London, 1961.

Tennessee Williams, Signi Falk, College University Press, New Haven, Connecticut, 1961.

(3) Williams, "Desire and the Black Masseur" *One Arm and Other Stories*, New Directions, 1948.